DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SPEECH AND WRITING: DOES IT MATTER?

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On the whole, it has been long known that both speech (spoken language) and writing are different in various aspects; however, not many language teachers are fully able to differentiate between such differences. This paper, therefore, aims to outline and examine some significant differences between these two entities. In addition, the implication of how this understanding might be useful for language teachers will be discussed.

In this paper, I will examine the distinctive differences between speech and writing which can be summarized into three aspects:

    I.   physical forms,

    II. functions, and

    III. structures or characteristic features

I. Physical forms

Theoretically, the most obvious difference between speech and writing can be seen in their physical forms. Namely, speech uses "phonic substance," typically in the form of air-pressure whereas writing uses "graphic substance," which is in the form of marks on a surface (Crystal, 1987).

II. Functions

Both speech and writing play important roles in communicative functions but from different points of view. Generally speaking, the primary function of speech is interactional or listener-oriented (Brown & Yule, 1983). This means that speech has been used to establish and maintain social relationships. For example, two lady guests are standing having a buffet dinner at a party and one turns to the other and says, "This is a wonderful party, isn't it?" In this situation, the statement implies that the speaker is ready to be friendly and talk to the other speaker.

By contrast, Brown and Yule (1983) point out that the primary function of writing is transactional or message-oriented since it focuses on transmitting information. From this point of view, it is believed that writing has enabled the human race to develop its own culture. Also, writing can help men to make use of the knowledge of their ancestors and that of others in different cultures.

However, it is sometimes possible to find writing genres whose purpose is not primarily to inform but to maintain social relationships such as love letters and "thank

you" letters; likewise, speech can sometimes be transactional if its purpose is to inform or get things done in the real world (Ibid). For instance, a boss dictates a letter. In this situation, he asks his secretary to take notes in writing so as to record what he has said.

III. Structures or Characteristic Features

As far as structures or characteristic features are concerned, speech and writing are different in the following ways.

Firstly, from the point of view of production, it can be seen that speech is time-bound, dynamic and temporary (Crystal, 1987). In this case, both participants are present and have face-to-face contact with each other. Thus, the speaker must monitor what he has said and determine whether it matches his intentions or not while he is speaking, and simultaneously planning his next utterance to fit what he wants to say (Brown & Yule, 1983).

On the contrary, writing is space-bound, static and permanent (Crystal, 1987). In this aspect, the writer is distant from the reader and, sometimes, may not even know the reader. As a result, the writer is more concerned with producing something that will be consistent and defensible when read by different people in different places (Chafe, 1982). The writer also has an opportunity to look over what he has written or even rewrite his work if he is not satisfied with it. In doing so, the writer has no fear of his reader interrupting him, while the speaker is under considerable pressure to keep on talking during the period alloted to him (Brown & Yule, 1983). This implies

that the speaker is, to some extent, aware of what he has said to his interlocutor. That is, if there is something wrong with what the speaker has said, he will have to take immediate action to change or repair it.

However, there are some good advantages that the speaker has over the writer. For example, in a spoken interaction the speaker can observe his listener and thus be able to monitor his listener's reaction to what he says (Ibid). Moreover, in a face-to-face interaction the speaker can use the whole range of facial expressions, gestures and general body language to help convey the message whereas the writer has no opportunity to obtain immediate feedback from the reader, or if he really wants to know, he has to imagine it (Harmer, 1991). Nevertheless, Harmer (1991) argues that the writer can still compensate for this disadvantage by creating greater clarity and by the use of grammatical and stylistic techniques for focusing attention on the main points.

Secondly, writing allows repeated reading because units of discourse, such as sentences and paragraphs, are clearly identified through layout and punctuation, while the spontaneity and rapidity of speech minimizes the opportunity of complex preplanning and degree of fluency (Crystal, 1987).

Therefore, it is fairly common to hear false starts, repetition, rephrasing, fillers (e.g., *erm, well, you know, you see, I think, of course,* and so on), back-channelling (e.g., *mm, mmhm, yea* and so on), and the use of intonation and pauses in spoken language.

Example:

A: What about **erm** Stephen do you s

B: └ he comes to Aikido with me now **(A: oh yea)** I try to **er**

encourage him to do it **(.)** I've tried the painting a bit on'em all **(A: yea)** painting I've

tried **you know (A: yea)** tried to find if there's anything there **you know** anything that's

been passed on **(.)** Sally's quite good **(.)** for her age like **you know (A: mm)**

(.) erm she seems to be able to put things in the right place **(.)** which is something **(.)**

[taken from the extract quoted in "An Introduction To Language and Society", pp. 112-113 by Montgomery, 1995]

According to Montgomery (1995), this example displays several distinctive features of real spontaneous speech. To begin with, "A" has not finished his question yet when "B" takes his turn. This can easily occur in spoken language as "B" knows what "A" is talking about. Secondly, "B" uses a lot of pauses (indicated by full stops in parentheses in the tapescript) to reveal the fact that he needs to take "time off" to work out the next piece of his utterance. Thirdly, "B" uses fillers (*er, erm, and you know*) to tell "A" that he wants to continue his turn; however, in this context "you know" can be considered as a marker of sympathetic circularity which functions as a framework of shared understanding between "A" and "B". Fourthly, "A" uses back-channelling (*yea and mm*) to inform "B" that he invites "B" to continue his turn. Finally, "B" uses repetitions of "painting", "tried" and "anything" so as to help "A" to follow him.

Thirdly, the syntax of speech is typically much less structured than that of writing (Brown & Yule, 1983). This means that speech tends to contain many incomplete sentences, usually phrases. Frequently, speech is less formally correct in terms of the traditional grammar. Furthermore, speech does not contain so many subordinate clauses as writing does. As for connectors, it is found that a narrow range appears in speech, such as *and, but* and *then,* while in writing an extensive use of connectors exists, e.g. *when, while, moreover, besides, however* and so on. Another interesting case in terms of syntax is that in speech the occurrence of passive constructions is relatively infrequent compared to that of writing.

Example

A: where I stayed was in Mea + was off Morningside Road ++

B: oh + yes + that's not far from where Grandpa's house +

A: yes + just further on + in the bus + you know the Plaza + there as a Plaza + do you remember it + further on

B: erm +

A: it was the next stop

B: oh yes + it's now something else

[taken from the extract quoted in "Teaching the Spoken Language", p. 72 by Brown, G. and Yule, G., 1983]

This example displays some typical features of spoken languages. It contains several incomplete sentences, for example, *'Where I stayed was in Mea,' 'was off*

Morningside Road,' and some phrases like *'just further on'* and *'further on.'* It is also common to see interactive expressions like *'erm,'* *'oh yes'* in spoken language.

Fourthly, it can be clearly seen that writing contains more density of packing of information than speech (Brown & Yule, 1983). Namely, in writing a lot of heavy noun phrases, adjectival phrases, adverbial phrases and complex syntax are used.

Example 1:

                                1
"This episode was **the sensation of the second day's proceedings –**
                2   3
affecting all the audience, affecting everybody except Jim, who was
        4
sitting moodily at the end of the first bench and never looked at this
                                                5
extraordinary and damning witness that seemed possessed of some mysterious theory of

defence."

[taken from "Lord Jim", p. 73 by Joseph Conrad]

This example displays the densely packed information included in one sentence. The sentence contains a noun phrase (1), two modifiers or reduced adjectival clauses (2 and 3) and two subordinate clauses or adjectival clauses (4 and 5).

Example 2:

                                1
"The risks were made clear yesterday, **when sources in Japan with**
                        1.1
close ties to North Korea said | **it was "only a matter of time"** | **before the**
        2   3
communist state restarted a nuclear fuel reprocessing plant that could

produce weapons-grade plutonium."

[This news extract is taken from "The Nation", p. 9A, March 5, 2003.]

Usually, it is very common to find the densely packed information and complex syntax in newspapers. This extract contains only one sentence consisting of two

adverbial clauses (1 and 2), a noun clause (1.1), an adjectival clause (3) and five noun phrases: *sources in Japan with close tie to North Korea; a matter of time; the communist state; a nuclear fuel reprocessing plant; and weapons-grade plutonium.*

Fifthly, the vocabulary used in everyday speech tends to be informal and typically generalized, e.g., *a lot of, thing, sort of, do, nice* and so on (Crystal, 1987) Sometimes empty nonsense words may be found in speech such as *whatchamacallit and doo-da.* Obviously, there are certain items of vocabulary which are rarely or never spoken, e.g., a variety of academic terminology. For example, if a word "lexicon" is used in a general conversation, it can be assumed that nobody knows, except those who have the knowledge of linguistics, that this word has the same general meaning as "vocabulary;" however, if the word "vocabulary" is used, there is no need to point out its meaning.

Sixthly, writing displays several features such as punctuation, capitalization, spatial organization and other graphic effects (Crystal, 1987). In writing the sentences are indicated by capital letters at the beginning and periods at the end. Other items of punctuation, e.g., question marks, italics, commas, exclamation marks and so on, are used to reveal syntactic structure and, to some extent, intonation, stress and contrast (Fromkin & Rodman, 1993).

e.g. Jim kissed Bill's wife. [not Tom's or his own]

However, according to the example given, the speaker can compensate for this disadvantage by using extra stress, called contrastive stress (stronger stress) on *Bill's* instead of punctuation.

Another example of punctuation is the apostrophe used in contractions and possessives, which is rarely found in speech.

e.g., 1.   my *brother's* friends (one brother)
      2.   my *brothers'* friends (two or more brothers)

Unfortunately, what writing fails to do in this aspect is to provide for the prosody – the accents, rhythm and intonation which help to mark the syntax of speech (Bolinger & Sears, 1981).

Lastly, according to Crystal (1987), writing tends to be more formal than speech and is more likely to provide the value standard of the society; for example, sacred writings are used as part of a religious tradition.

Speech or Writing?

In light of the differences between speech and writing discussed earlier, it is clear that the understanding of these differences is not only useful but also necessary for language teachers as this insight can help teachers become aware of the aims of the courses they are going to focus on as well as the appropriate approaches and materials that should be used according to students' needs so that students can utilize what they have learnt in their real lives.

As far as writing is concerned, the purpose is to emphasize accuracy. According to native speakers, if a piece of writing with mistakes and half-finished sentences were produced, it would be judged as illiterate (Harmer, 1991). Consequently, students should be taught how to compose writing in an accurate, effective and appropriate way. For example, students should be provided with learning tasks

which guide them how to organize their ideas into a logically coherent piece of writing.

Still, it is, to some extent, accepted that teaching writing is easier than teaching spoken language because teachers can provide good models of almost any kind of writing, and in this case if students copy the models carefully, they certainly can produce correct writing (Brown & Yule, 1983). Yet, it is important to bear in mind that the tasks provided for students should be meaningful and relevant to students' needs.

Conversely, when teaching spoken language, the aim is to focus on fluencywhich helps create the smooth flow of a conversation. In this case, "accuracy" in terms of complete sentences tends to be inappropriate as, in fact, real spoken language is spontaneous. An obvious example to support this idea is that the everyday speech produced by native speakers contains many slips, errors and incompleteness. Thus, when practising speaking, students should be encouraged to take risks with no fear of being interrupted by teachers when they make mistakes.

Moreover, students should be taught how to produce both short turns (one or two utterances) and long turns (a string of utterances) in conversations, and they should be provided with practical activities, e.g., games, group discussion, role play, simulation and so on, in order to help the students develop their speaking skills. However, it is important to remember that accuracy in terms of grammar and pronunciation should be included as the first step of teaching spoken language.

Conclusion

Speech and writing are different in three significant aspects: (1) physical forms, (2) functions and (3) structures or characteristic features; however, both of them have one obvious thing in common, that is, they are used as a means of communication. As for teachers, it is very important to understand such differences as this can reflect in what way the syllabus should be designed – what to focus on : accuracy or fluency, and what teaching approaches and classroom activities should be integrated into the course syllabus so as to meet students' needs.

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